Getting there

We have to get to 10 April as there won’t be a fourth chance

ANALYSIS by KANAK MANI DIXIT

Those who say with cynical certitude that elections cannot happen on 10 April do not know what they are talking about. They are the kind who would very much wish that their armchair prediction comes true, for whatever reason.

The fact is, there are too many variables in Nepali politics (new challenges, potential conflagrations, but also possible turnkey solutions) for anyone to be so sure that the polls cannot happen. The public, for its part, desires the constituent assembly elections desperately. But wanting them is not enough. The political parties, the government such as it is, and the Madhesi leadership must work to make them happen.

We can get there if the political players work intensively over the next 10 days or so. Then they must begin to seriously discuss election observation, voter education regarding the mixed system, the election code of conduct, and ensuring security during polling. And it will be a relief to actually get to the point where we can be discussing how to prevent ’booth-capturing’ by first-time parties, and first-time losers going on rampage. This river is full of boulders and rapids, but we have to get to the other side.

Just because elections have been delayed again, it doesn’t mean they have to be deferred again. New demands are piling up on top of old, unfulfilled demands, but that doesn’t mean elections can’t happen in April.

To begin with, one needs to analyse why the first two attempts fell apart. Polls had to be put off in June for logistical reasons: politicians were busy putting into place the code of conduct, the comprehensive peace agreement, the interim constitution, interim parliament and interim government. An insurgency can’t be transformed overnight and the most the politicians can be blamed for is being optimistic about the scheduling.
OIL SLICK

The parasitical Nepal Oil Corporation is a parasite. But even by its dismal management standards, the decision this week to raise prices was deft. The soaring sprey by acolytes of the Maoist parties in government also demonstrated exactly what is wrong with this country. But one can understand the fury of consumers. The street protests may have been orchestrated and underwritten, but they showed the widespread fettle towards the state, not just for the price hike but also its general incompetence and apathy to the needs of the people in the nearly two years it has been in power.

The timing of the price rise was all wrong, coming just as hopes for timely constituent assembly elections were rekindled. It was like handing a reason on a platter to those who wanted any excuse to abort the elections yet again.

The intention behind the sudden price rise has to be questioned for operational reasons as well. Citing mounting losses, NOC had raised petrol prices just a week ago. Other than token opposition from some consumer groups, people at large had accepted that demand had been overwhelming and unfair. When crude prices go up in international markets, there is no way to escape the repercussions in countries that depend on imported fuels.

The argument that NOC can't afford to pay India for the refined petroleum products doesn't make sense because the government could have easily reduced the tax and maintained prices. It wastes our taxes anyway.

But even more reprehensible than NOC's decision was the timing of the protest, which yielded no fares rise by 25 percent. Diesel prices went up by less than that, and they are a small threat by the transportation cartels to raise fares by 25 percent.

Could such a hefty increase be justified? Diesel prices went up by less than that, and they are a small threat by the transportation cartels to raise fares by 25 percent. Diesel prices went up by less than that, and they are a small threat by the transportation cartels to raise fares by 25 percent. Diesel prices went up by less than that, and they are a small threat by the transportation cartels to raise fares by 25 percent.

The government has bought itself a little break in the pressure from the people in the nearly two years it has been in power. It was great to read about Nepal's

Another window

The government has bought itself a little more time to respond on the madhes.

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The government appeared to show relatively greater interest in kicking off talks this week with madhesi groups who responded by pushing the "decision" phase of their movement by a fortnight. This gave all sides some more time to evolve creative political responses.

MADHES

Prashant Jha is again trying to justify what the tarai outfits are trying to do (Editorial, #383). It is now crystal clear that the madhes uprising was staged by vested interests, resulting in thousands of Biharis getting Nepal citizenship, not madhesi. The tarai politicians know that as long as the pressure is not removed by an attack, especially from ethnic communities, so they are trying to extract as many concessions as possible. Although there was injustice, at no point was it to such an extent that they would form a separate state. Knowing the geography and ethnic mix of Nepal, it was absurd for Gorakhpur to demand a separate state. Knowing the geography and ethnic mix of Nepal, it was absurd for Gorakhpur to demand a separate state. Knowing the geography and ethnic mix of Nepal, it was absurd for Gorakhpur to demand a separate state.

Bad news: this isn't a breakthrough. The players are not looking for a solution, but are safeguarding immediate interests. And the two do not necessarily converge beyond a point. The seven parties still don't have a plan and responses are characterized by incoherence. NC leaders are in a trouble to carve out space. Sushil Koirala said that if he only knew how to get in touch with God and Jwala Singh, he would talk. Is that a joke? The president of the country's largest party can't get hold of two Indian mutilated members? Maybe he should ask his madhesi activists, many of whom are also with armed groups. Kamal Pandeel suddenly wants to act as peacemaker because he saw the ground slipping beneath his feet with Sujata Koirala establishing contact with some madhesi groups through a flyer. Encouraged by doubly, Sujata had to ask her colleagues for political victory if the armed groups come just for one round of talks.

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The only other thing to do is to abolish the corrupt parasitical monopoly called NOC and open up petroleum imports to the private sector. Our gas stations are the most squalid in South Asia and the fuel is the most expensive and adulterated.

It is time to clean this up once and for all. And if this week street riots had one message for our rulers, it was that people are fed up with the corruption and mismanagement of NOC, but with its utter lack of accountability.

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Tuesday 22 January could prove to be a defining date in our collective memory. In turbulent periods of history, uncertainty is the only certainty. Days break with a strange mixture of hope, despair and foreboding in the air. Dusk brings a resigned sense of relief. But even in the confusion of constant change, some days are more tumultuous than others.

From early morning, rumours about the prime minister’s health began spreading through Kathmandu. Meticulously planned and carefully orchestrated tyre burning shut down the city’s thoroughfares, ostensibly in protest at the previous evening’s petroleum price rise. A madhesi officer at the Agricultural Development Bank in Rajbiraj was shot dead for refusing to hand over Rs 3 million. In Khotang, for the first time since the civil war ended, three police posts were overrun and their arms looted by a mysterious crowd, which later clarified its intent to prevent the constituent assembly elections at any cost.

For hope, we had to look abroad. In New York, UNMIN was denied an expansion of its role, reportedly at the insistence of the Chinese. In New Delhi, the British and Indian prime ministers welcomed the announcement of a date for Nepal’s constituent assembly elections. Together they urged all parties “to cooperate and maintain the declared date to ensure a free and fair process, open to all without intimidation.” For good measure, they added a pious sermon: “It is for the people of Nepal to decide their own future.” Phew! What a relief! At least in their eyes, we are masters of our own destiny.

This destiny, however, seems to be slowly slipping from our grasp. Powerful forces opposed to the sovereignty of the people have begun to act in silent concert to subvert all efforts to hold the elections. They have been dormant until now because they didn’t believe the Seven Party Alliance was serious about the polls. With Maoists and mainstreamers at each other’s throats, there was no need for a third party to meddle. But several simultaneous developments have changed the status quo.

For the first time since their entry into mainstream politics, the Maoists have officially decided to enter the electoral fray. Pushpa Kamal Dahal directed his cadres to return property to its rightful owners and consented silently when home minister Krishna Prasad Sitaula promised to mobilise local administrations to help restore land to its title-holders. Despite apprehension over the poll result, the Maoists appear to be preparing to face the electorate.

The constituent assembly election will also be the death of the royalists. There is no way the interim parliament will accept any role for the king. But, contrary to widespread suspicion, the silence of Gyanendra can also be construed as his acquiescence to the necessity and importance of a constituent assembly.

More than anything else, it’s the enthusiastic participation of people in the SPA’s mass meetings in Biratnagar and Bhairahawa that has alarmed those opposed to the polls. The SPA leadership needs to extend these programs to the districts. Constituent assembly elections are not about making a government or choosing a president. They are about charting the future course of Nepal. That requires nothing less than the complete unity of purpose among the constituents of SPA government assigned to the task of conducting elections.

With the Maoists now on board, it looks like someone else is causing trouble.
As far as November is concerned, even though the key janajati and madhes groups had signed on, the Maoists got cold feet. But then the rebel radicals couldn’t show any chamatkar and so now we would have to believe that the party is ready to take the plunge. In the interim, the madhes has come onto the boil, with several new political organisations intent on creating a political base in fast-forward.

Meanwhile, the parliamentary parties are in election mode, with the leaders back on the campaign trail. They have not walked for nine long years. True, there are factions within the Nepali Congress and CPN (Maoist) which do not want polls, but their potential for damage is limited if the momentum picks up. The same holds true for those who would wish for a rightward slide of the polity.

But the six-plus-one parties have not focused enough on the madhes issue, which has to be resolved to get the country to the ballot box. In fact, the first joint mass rally in Kathmandu on 14 January had the flavour of a pahadiya challenge to the madhes—just the wrong message at this time, when symbolism has become so important. The subsequent rallies in Biratnagar and Bhairahwa corrected the flavour somewhat.

Madhesi demands can be tackled with relative ease, but for that you first have to have a functioning government. Girija Prasad Koirala’s distanced leadership has become more remote due to illness, and senior kangresis are up in arms about the elevation of the First Daughter to ministerdom and chief troubleshooter.

Amidst this, the new entities in the tarai are trying to build a political base in a region electrified by last winter’s Madhes Movement. Madhesi leaders face challenges on several fronts: the widespread populism that has gripped large parts of the tarai, a brutal militancy that demands obeisance, and a Kathmandu which seems incapable of extending even simple courtesies. Amidst these challenges, the politicians of tarai-madhes have maintained a sense of proportion and responsibility.

The hill-centric national leadership needs to pay attention to demands coming from the working alliance of Upena Yadav, Rajendra Mahato and Mahanta Thakur. A state establishment that has been magnanimous with the Maoists could well attend to madhesi grievances.

The tripartite madhes leadership wants a commitment to autonomy (soyattata, not limited to the tani people), a term which would be defined for the Nepali context by the sovereign, elected constituent assembly. In fact, autonomy is already mentioned in the government’s agreement with the Madhes Janadhar Forum of last August. It would be the task of the proposed state-restructuring commission to go deeper into the matter.

The plains leaders also seek electoral reforms or, alternatively, flexible interpretation of existing regulations to allow their fledgling parties to choose more madhesi candidates under the ‘proportional’ list of the mixed system. Meanwhile, the grating issue of under-representation in the state machinery must be addressed with a promise of fast-track inclusion for disadvantaged communities through the Civil Service Commission in the days to come.

If the madhes matter is indeed a challenge to the holding of elections, then it is a question of deciding whether these distilled demands can be accepted before populist pressures force the Thakur-Yadav-Mahato trio to shift the goalposts. The demands, shorn of microphone rhetoric, can be agreed to without taking away the right of the elected constituent assembly to define the relevant terms, be it federalism or autonomy.

The assembly, after all, is where the vertical demands of individual communities of plain, hill and mountain will come up against each other, and where finally some horizontal give-and-take will begin to give shape to the new structure of the Nepali state. That is why we have to get to the elections on 10 April, as it is clear there will not be a fourth opportunity.

KIAN PANDAY
Thai to Kathmandu

Orient Thai, a low-cost full-service airline, will now be providing flights between Kathmandu and Bangkok. The inaugural flight on 29 December took more than 100 passengers to Bangkok on its MD82 aircraft. The airline is scheduled to fly to Bangkok on Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday.

Image is everything

Unknown groups are trying to tarnish the image of Gorkha Lahari’s Brown cigarettes by selling them in the market without their filters. The company is launching an aggressive media campaign to spread awareness among customers about this illegal activity.

NEW PRODUCTS

YARIS: Vaidyais Organisation of Industries and Trading Houses has launched a new Toyota in the small-car segment through its automotive distribution unit, United Traders Syndicate. The Toyota Yaris is a high-end hatchback and costs Rs 24,00,000.

Misplaced concern

Capital flight and market liquidity are not Nepal’s worries

New Delhi: This week has been a rollercoaster ride for Indian stock markets. The Sensex that is used as the benchmark to understand the Indian market plummeted below 16,000 but recovered as soon as the US announced its interest rate cut. The Indian market has become truly globalised, meaning economic conditions and decisions made in the United States or Europe sway the fortunes of the Indian markets.

While some investors are crying foul over the way the bourse has been managed, the reality of the market has finally emerged.

Eyes that were glued to the television analysis of the international markets perhaps ignored the shutdown in Nepal on Tuesday and Wednesday. We have now found that it’s the streets that determine the economy, not financial fundamentals! While street leaders have found it easy to protest each fuel price rise, they have yet to help find a solution to the pricing of a product that Nepal does not produce but must import at prices determined by international factors.

The rate cut by the Federal Reserve in the US is in anticipation of a recession. This would definitely affect liquidity in global markets, and impact on stock markets across the world.

This was clear from the way Asian markets reacted this week to US economy data and the Fed rate cut. The Indian media took advantage of the visit by British Prime Minister Gordon Brown to state that India is now the second biggest investor in the UK, and the UK is the fourth biggest in India.

For Nepal, perhaps it does not matter much as we have opted out of integrating with the global economy. We are happy to bet our money on whether elections will take place or not and if they will, whether they will be in April 2008 or some other time.

While self-styled intellectuals do talk about a liquidity crisis and capital flight in the Nepali context, this Beed can’t see any relevance. It’s like a barefoot shopper choosing between Gucci and Bally. A country that relies on remittances for nearly a quarter of its GDP cannot be facing such a crunch. If there has been capital flight, the money that came in through informal channels went out through informal channels.

The volume of land transfer deeds that are being executed at the Land Revenue offices clearly shows there is money here. With a stock exchange that has transaction volumes on the wrong side of the decimal point, we cannot talk about a liquidity crisis.

It is like a 100-house property developer calling his project a satellite city!

The more urgent issue here is one of borrowing. With commercial activities stagnating thanks to security and labour problems, falling tax revenue and increasing losses on fuel products are widening the fiscal gap.

India is planning its own price rise on fuel products in the next couple of weeks. The Communist partners in the current government are posturing to oppose it, perhaps learning from Nepal. If the hike goes ahead, it will be another nail in the Nepali fiscal coffin.

www.arthabeed.com
Street power

Editorial in Nepal Samacharpatra, 24 January

After raising petrol prices for the third time in three months, the government has finally rolled back the price hike. It had to bow to the demands of the people after the valley and the entire nation protested on the streets for two consecutive days. However, the protest programs did affect a lot of people. Media staff were attacked by protesters while even the sick were made to climb down from the ambulances.

The government, parliament and the country administration decided to raise the fuel prices without considering the impact it would have on ordinary people. Although the students went into the streets to protest the inconsiderate price hike, they clearly were no more considerate when it came to humanity.

The protest was expected, but the protest organisers were incapable of controlling the infraction. Those against the CA polls can take advantage of mass demonstrations like this and put the blame on the political parties and students. At a crucial period like this, protest organisers need to tell the public why the bill has not been implemented. The government needs to inform investors about the petroleum products. They had raised the price of petrol and diesel were raised to control adulteration show how irresponsible the corporation is. NOC needs to improve massively. It should make sure its customers get their moneys worth when they buy its products.

A year ago the government decided to let private investors distribute petroleum products. They had even registered a bill, but the parliament has not been able to implement it. The government needs to tell the public why the bill has not been implemented. The government needs to roll back on petroleum prices after two days of protest shows the streets make the decisions, not the government.

The seven parties’ decision to hike the petrol prices on Monday and then roll back the prices on Wednesday shows how gullible the government is. Generally people are always against a raise in petrol prices. The protest after the price hike should have been anticipated but the government failed to plan anything ahead of time. When organisations related to the parties in the government took to the streets, the government could not stand by its decision.

After the increase in oil prices in the international market, the government had no option but to raise prices. However, it did not do its homework before raising them. The Nepal Oil Corporation should have told the public about the international prices and its accounting losses before the price hike. NOC is yet to provide a reason for the price hike. It has not answered questions about how much tax the government pays or why the tax can’t be reduced.

Statements from NOC’s chief officer claiming the prices of petrol and diesel were raised to control adulteration show how irresponsible the corporation is. NOC needs to improve massively. It should make sure its customers get their moneys worth when they buy its products.

The almost blind and deaf government pays no heed to small and insignificant protests. It took a huge demonstration like the one we had on Wednesday to roll back the prices. It would be in the best interests of everyone if the protests could be strong enough to make the government listen while the tarai violence became a colossal problem. Despite the Gaur incident in March 2007 and Kapilbastu in September 2007, Sitaula is still the home minister.

Saroj Raj Adhikari in Nepal, 27 January

Situula the survivor

Saroj Raj Adhikari in Nepal, 27 January

Krishna Prasad Sitaula has managed to hold on to his position of home minister for the third time despite opposition from the seven parties. Even the Maoists who were known to have a soft spot for Sitaula have spoken out against him. Senior Maoist leader Baburam Bhattarai says: “The home administration is very weak.”

During his two years’ tenure as home minister, a record number of people lost their lives while the tarai violence became a colossal problem. Despite the Gaur incident in March 2007 and Kapilbastu in September 2007, Sitaula is still the home minister.

When asked whether Sitaula’s appointment was due to lack of alternative candidates, Bhattarai said: “We have plenty of candidates but the NC just won’t let go. Both national and international power houses have made sure that the home ministry isn’t given to us.” NC’s Govinda Raj Joshi said: “It’s not just the prime minister who wants Sitaula in the cabinet. Madhak Kumar Nepal and Pushpa Kamal Dahal want him too.”

Other parties have voiced their opinions about Sitaula’s incompetence in maintaining law and order. The Election Commission and various diplomatic organisations have also shown concern at the worsening peace and security situation.

Although Bhattarai denied that the Maoists are holding on to Sitaula, he accepted that the Maoists were in favour of Sitaula rather than other leaders from the NC. Bhattarai asked: “Who has better vision than Sitaula in NC? Khum Bahadur, Govinda Raj?” According to him, NC’s failure to move with the times is more responsible for the worsening situation than Sitaula’s leadership.

Relations between the Maoists and Sitaula soured after two dozen Maoist party workers were killed in the Gaur incident and Sitaula openly put the blame for the postponement of the November election on the Maoists. The CA polls have been announced for early April and peace and security is a must if the election is to take place. The question is whether Sitaula, who has failed to create a suitable environment for the election twice before, will succeed this time.
Indian ambassador Shiv Shankar Mukherjee is being reassigned as High Commissioner to London after four years in Nepal. During this time he witnessedking Gyanendra’s rule, the emergence of the alliance between the political parties and the Maoists, the April Uprising, the comprehensive peace agreement and the interim government. As he prepares to leave, Mukherjee spoke to Nepal Times.

Nepal Times: Nepal has gone through a lot during your tenure. What are your feelings as you take up your new assignment?
Shiv Shankar Mukherjee: Believe me, Nepal has been easily the most challenging assignment that I have had in my 36 years of service. For me it has been a unique experience to have been a part of a period when Nepal has virtually gone through a rebirth. To have a ringside view of history is a very special feeling indeed.

I know there is a long way to go even now before the Nepalese people achieve their goal of peace, stability and prosperity, but one thing I am absolutely sure about is that they will get there. As the representative of India, it was my very special privilege to have been involved in providing whatever support Nepal needed from India in this period of transition. And as I prepare to leave, I know that this will continue to be our policy: to provide all the moral, political, diplomatic and material assistance to Nepal that is within our capabilities to assist Nepal’s own efforts.

What aspect of the political changes are you most satisfied about?

I think the most satisfactory aspect of the political changes that have taken place in Nepal is the fact that they have arisen out of a mass movement, a genuine peoples movement that expressed its desire for democracy and for having a say in the way they are ruled. To any observer it was clear that this was a total and genuine expression of people power and was non-violent.

And what were the most frustrating?

Well, I really would not characterise developments in this period as full of frustration or difficulty. The most frustrating is usually because of diplomatic (laughs). What people find otherwise and I am not simply being sarcastic, I am not being diplomatic, and I would tell him that this is something that I have not seen or heard about in my almost four decades of service. By any yardstick, Nepal’s achievement on this score is not just praiseworthy, it is amazing and I mean this most sincerely. I think those who look at this process in Nepal as full of frustration are those who will always find the glass half empty and not half full.

What advice would you give your successor about how to deal with Nepali sensitivities about big brother India?

What I would emphasise is that a vast majority of the population of Nepal at every level, does not wake up every morning and start thinking about his or her sensitivities about India. They want to get on with life, want improvement in the family’s standard of living, better nutrition. There would be occasions, arising out of the mindset of the past, when those who have a vested interest in trying to muddy this relationship will try to do so, but I would also emphasise that their number and effectiveness is negligible and can safely be ignored most of the time.

I would equally emphasise that a stable and prosperous Nepal continues to be something that is a boon for India and that this goal is what both our countries will work for, in partnership. I would tell him about my experiences when I got out of the valley into the other Nepal, neglected in the past, and the genuine desire for cooperation and development that I have personally witnessed in the course of laying foundation stones or inaugurating our developmental projects 100 times over.

Impeachment that crop up from time to time can be dealt with very easily, not just because of the number of institutional mechanisms which have been put in place over the years, but even more so because both countries understand each other well enough to be able to sort these out amicably, with due regard for each other’s interests. Frankly, as the large southern neighbour, it is India which should and can go the extra mile in these matters.

There are some who say Nepal is a failing state.

I disagree totally with this view. I have had absolutely no inhibitions in saying so boldly and clearly to a host of visitors from abroad who parachute into this country and develop some kind all instant expertise in the space of 24 hours, which they feel qualifies them to make value judgments about this country which they perhaps could not locate on a map before they got into the plane for Kathmandu.

Nepal is not a failed or failing state. Yes, it can be called a poor country in terms of its GDP and yes, it has a long way to go in terms of development. However, the fact is that it has democratic credentials that should be the envy of many of the countries of the world. It is a vibrant, resilient and open society. It has a free and courageous press and the rule of the law, however flawed.

It has a government that is dealing with the problems of transition that are facing the country, almost for the first time in the history of its existence, with a measure of confidence. No wonder it enjoys the support of the international community in its quest for a Nepal that is at peace with itself and the world. I do not want to name names but by any criteria I would put a large number of countries on the list of those which could be identified as failing states.

How optimistic are you about the elections being held on schedule this time?

I know that there is a lot of scepticism about the elections in April. I do not blame those who have their doubts. Postponement of elections in June last year and again in November, for whatever reasons, was certainly disappointing to the people of Nepal, let alone the international community. It looks as though the people have gone from euphoria to realisation and now inevitably, human nature being what it is, towards apathy and pessimism. But the developments in recent weeks and the agreements that have been reached by the political parties about the elections, and the fact that they are now collectively announcing their commitment to the elections, augurs well for the future.

No matter how much cynicism exists in some quarters, there is a realisation that this time there will be absolutely no excuse that people will accept for not having elections. I know, as every observer knows, that there are those who are for the status quo, but their numbers are minuscule compared with those who believe that the best way for taking the peace process forward is a reasonable free and fair election.

But there are serious obstacles to the elections.

One course there are obstacles and it would be naïve to ignore them. First and foremost is the law and order situation, especially in the tarai. This has to be tackled not just as a law and order situation but also politically. As we all know, this is in fact being done. I am confident that the law and order and overall security situation, even if it does not become 100 percent manageable by the time elections are held, will be sufficiently under control to have reasonably free and fair elections in April this year.

And the only other obstacle that I can see is those groups that stand to lose their positions and power, and perhaps the comfort of their present existence, if elections are held in a free and fair manner. I think that is an obstacle that can be overcome given that the vast majority of the people of Nepal have made their desire for elections very clear indeed.
In a lodge in Manang, a woman adjusts her headscarf as she laughs at the sight of her grandson feeding from his mother’s breast. The curious one-year-old can’t resist a quick break from his feed to see what’s going on around him in the room.

Only then do I notice his grandmother has a swelling around her neck, a goitre. I am surprised—not to see it, but to realise this is the first I’ve seen in five days of trekking. Things have changed dramatically from when I was here 25 years ago.

Further along the trail, a crippled and dumb middle-aged man shows me a hand-written note which reads: “My name is Raj Singh, I am physically handicapped, please help me.” I can see at once he is suffering from cretinism. He is physically and mentally impaired due to his mother’s iodine deficiency at the time of his birth. He has been given this note to help him solicit donations from tourists. That is also new.

In this district in 1982, there is a strong chance that a young mother, like the one at the lodge, would have had a goitre, and her child would have been born with cretinism. Back then, while making a film about iodine deficiency for UNICEF, I took hundreds of photographs of people of all ages with goitres, some the size of footballs or large grapefruit. They were not hard to find. In one village, 80 percent of the population had goitres and 20 percent of all newborn children suffered from cretinism.

Today the term “cretin” is considered passé, yet back in the early 1980s the medical profession had to redefine the word because of the high incidence of the illness throughout the Himalayas. At that time I followed a medical team through Manang, under the leadership of Dr Purushotham Thapa, which gave iodine oil injections to young women to provide five years of protection. The situation has now improved dramatically. Iodine Deficiency Disorders (IDD) no longer appear near the top of Nepal’s list of major health problems.

Historically, iodine deficiency has been a problem in most of the world’s major mountainous areas, where people lived far from the sea and so did not have access to naturally occurring iodine or sea salt in their diet. In the Alps, the Rockies and the Andes, it was common at the beginning of the 20th century to find people with goitres. In the Himalayas, the scale of the problem was not fully understood until the 1980s. Many remote communities had been devastated. Children born to mothers with iodine deficiency suffered problems ranging from mild mental and physical stunting to more severe mental deficiency, deaf mutism, dwarfism and hypothyroidism.

Just 150 micrograms of iodine per day in an adult’s diet is enough to prevent these conditions, but 25 years ago few in Nepal knew this. Many blamed the water supply and responded with offerings to the gods. Children with severe cases were often tethered at home to avoid embarrassing the family.

Nepal in the 1980s lacked the infrastructure to cope with the problem. There were only 300 registered doctors, most of them in the Kathmandu valley and main towns, and there was little scope for any mass media campaign as few hill areas had radio access and fewer than 20 percent of women could read.

Initially, UNICEF worked with the government to introduce iodised salt packed into gunny sacks for distribution in the hills, but by the time the salt reached the remote mountain communities, the iodine had leached out, making it no better than local rock salt. They then launched an emergency protection program targeting three million young mothers to receive iodine oil injections.

I travelled with one of these teams and watched villagers bring out their family members—both adults and children—believing the injection would cure them. The scale of the problem was shocking. The injection could not cure those affected, and all too often we saw severely mentally impaired adults, who had spent their entire lives hidden away indoors, returned to their dark rooms by disappointed relatives.

In the late 1980s, a concerted effort was made to step up the campaign against IDD throughout what was then known as the “Himalayan goitre belt”, stretching from Pakistan to Burma. The 43rd World Health Assembly in 1990 resolved to completely eliminate these disorders. So far, only Bhutan has declared the complete eradication of IDD, but Nepal is on track to follow. The key lies in being able to supply iodised salt to more than 90 percent of the population. For remote areas like Manang, the humble plastic bag plays a vital role, keeping the salt fresh and preventing the iodine from leaching out before it reaches its destination.

Although the fight against IDD may be near to won, there are still scores of people living in the hills who need assistance as a result of this deficiency.

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The volatile iodine in the salt evaporates. The distribution system must also be efficient so the salt isn’t stored for long periods after iodisation.
A successful 30-year combined effort by government, the private sector and aid agencies has all but wiped out visible goitre in Nepal. The percentage of Nepali households with access to iodised salt is now 90 percent—much higher than India (59 percent) or Pakistan (17 percent). In fact, Nepal is the only country in South and Southeast Asia that has such high use of iodised salt.
Part of the reason for the success has been the fact that the government has made Salt Trading Corporation the sole dealer in this important commodity. This has ensured a uniform nationwide supply of subsidised iodised salt, ensuring quality and low prices. The subsidy has been supported by the Ministry of Health, the Indian government and UNICEF. Iodisation and packaging plants are located strategically in Birtamod, Biratnagar, Janakpur, Bhairawa, Narayanghat and Nepalgunj.
But with STC going through a management transition, the salt distribution network could be affected. Non-edible salt for industrial use is also being smuggled into Nepal from India. This has below-threshold levels of sodium chloride and is unfit for human consumption, raising the danger of goitre resurfacing.
The salt consumed in northern Nepal (‘bhote noon’) is derived from Tibet’s lakes but lacks iodine. STC had plans to set up iodisation plants for Tibetan salt at the Chinese border in Hilsa in Humla district, and in Dolpo.
The government spends more than Rs 150 million subsidising the annual consumption of 150,000 tons of salt every year, making it among the cheapest in South Asia. Salt in Nepal costs Rs 10 per kg compared with Rs 16 in India, Rs 17 in Pakistan, Rs 20 in Bangladesh, and Rs 23 in Sri Lanka.
Ninety percent of Nepali women are also anaemic because they don’t get enough iron in their diet. With donor support, the government is now looking at double-fortification of salt with iron and iodine to address this problem in the diet of Nepali mothers.
Family, friends and the future

Sir Ed's state funeral celebrated his life with a determination to build on his remarkable legacy

JEMIMA SHERPA in AUCKLAND

The image of Kami Temba Sherpa, removing his traditional embroidered hat and bowing to touch his forehead to Sir Edmund Hillary's flag-draped casket was broadcast from St Mary's Church in Auckland around New Zealand and the world.

Despite the magnitude of the meticulously planned state funeral—the only uncontrollable aspect being the threatening edges of a cyclone, which settled into a gentle, accommodating drizzle—the day's events maintained the understated qualities for which Sir Ed was renowned. The service focused on the things that mattered most in his life: family, friends, his adventures and Nepal.

It is summer in Auckland, and the smooth roads, lined with people paying their final respects as the funeral cortege drove by, are a world away from the wintry mountain trails leading up to Sagarmatha. But in Hillary's home, which he shared with his wife, Lady June, there are touches of Nepal everywhere—from the prayer flag and khata-draped photograph of Sir Edmund in the living room to Tibetan carpets on the floors and statues, thankas, books, and photos lining walls and shelves.

Among the gathered mourners, strains of Sherpa and Nepali intermingled with accents from around the world, and the conversation was of Nepal's mountains, places and people: Everest, Ama Dablam, Khunde, Khumjung, Thame, Tengboche.

Ang Rita Sherpa, manager of the Himalayan Trust and one of four Sherpas in the official government party from Nepal, was one of the speakers at the funeral service. In his eulogy he described Sir Ed as "a man with a big heart, our true guardian and a second father... His loss, for us, is bigger and heavier than Mount Everest." Like countless Sherpas around the world, Ang Rita's life has been shaped by the man he had come to honour, beginning with an education at Khumjung school.

There had been some confusion at the airport when two Ang Rita Sherpas passed through security. The second is the son of the late Mingma Tsering Sherpa, Sir Ed's similar and best friend. This Ang Rita laughed as people told him they had seen his mother Ang Doolie Sherpa reminiscing about Hillary in an interview from Kathmandu.

Watching the daily news at the Hillary home was decidedly strange, as faces familiar from the screen later showed up in person at the house to pay their respects. New Zealand Prime Minister Helen Clark was among those offering their condolences. Beyond the big names and official representatives, there were countless others.

The bereavement

MIN RATNA BAJRACHARYA

On top of the world

Santosh Baral

He worked for a while as a porter and was later offered a job at Explore Himalaya, a trekking and climbing outfit. The company, impressed by his abilities, eventually gave him the chance to climb Chomolungma, and today he is a climbing guide at the company.

"The documentary gave me a chance to show the world how we climb mountains," Namgyal says. "This is a major accomplishment in my life."
Few have done has much for the Sherpas as Sir Edmund Hillary

national park, a carpenter said: ‘Had the park not been established, all the large trees would have been cut down to build lodges and it would now be hard to even find an axe handle in our forests.’

As with Sagarmatha National Park, so many other ideas of his that the Himalayan Trust has implemented over the years have produced amazing results. From building airstrips and hospitals to improving trails and bridges, he had the ability to see the larger picture.

He was also closely attuned to community needs and did not presume to have all the answers. Typically, when it became clear that the Himalayan Trust’s efforts to be met with equal understanding that they would return home to make their own contributions—which saw me involving in monastic education and language and culture, he countered the problem by investing in mountainous education and recruiting teachers of Sherpa origin from as far away as Darjeeling.

As entrepreneur Thukten Sherpa headmaster at the age of 18, as Darjeeling. Edmund helped me mature and spoke at the funeral of the friendship that had blossomed between his father and the fauna of the 1953 expedition had gathered for a final farewell. Dr Kami Tenzin, the first Sherpa doctor to be put in charge of Khunde hospital, met a steady stream of former Khunde volunteer doctors and colleagues who had worked there back in the 1970s.

Despite the sadness of the occasion, there was still room for laughter and jokes. As entrepreneur Thubten Sherpa placed a khata on the casket, one close friend commented: ‘Now that looks more like Ed!’

Everyone had an Edmund Hillary connection or story. Purna Sherpa, who had considered a mentor and role model, talked about the future of the conservation efforts in Nepal.

As the conversation ebbed and flowed throughout the day among all these people who had been privileged to know Sir Ed—whether from Nepal, Antarctica or elsewhere—a common thread was the insistence that the most fitting way to honour him would be to ensure that the work to which he dedicated his life should live on.

Jemima Sherpa was born in Khunde Hospital and is currently at university in Wellington, New Zealand.
Dreaming of home

Jewish exiles struggle to adapt

Michael Boganim’s Odessa/Odessa is a documentary of transnational identity told in three chapters, elegiacally depicting the lives of Ukrainian Jews first in the post-Soviet Ukrainian city of Odessa, then in New York City’s Brighton Beach and finally in Israel’s Ashdod. It is a meditation on the experience of aging, of displacement, of nostalgia and memory. With the films bold photography, each chapter has its own visual character: Odessa awash in hues of blue, Brighton Beach lightly sepia-tinted and Ashdod brightly sun-saturated. But the film maintains a certain continuity defined by the subject’s dislocation and yearning for a home: The Erevi connection with Odessa remains palpable and alive.

Beginning in Odessa, Boganim’s subjects, all clearly elderly, seem to inhabit the past just as much as the present, the accumulated weight of history and memory bearing down on their lives. One moment they debate whether the Soviet Red Army was the Messiah, a quaint but seemingly genuine pondering. The next, they reminisce about personal past glories in the theatre, the story so delightful its veracity seems beside the point. Amplifying the sense of place and history is the music.

providing a perfect counterpart to the images on the screen: the mournful violin, the radio from past and present, the snatches of conversation in Russian and Yiddish.

Notably absent from their homes are younger people, and in that absence their lives have the character of abandoned children that is at once both charming and aching. They barter childishly with each other, or dress up in peaks to pose before a mirror. The camera softly back away from its subject to bring into focus the environment they inhabit—homes that are blemished with the accumulated junk of aging members. That movement, and the kind of access the subjects allow Boganim, create a kind of ghostly witness to the activity in the Odessa chapter of the film.

Shifting to Brighton Beach and Ashdod, her subjects seem twice-eliminar, pulled away from a deteriorating and abandoned Odessa to greener pastures in Israel and the US. But once there, they find themselves unable to either divest their identity or be accepted. In glimpses that digress from its main subjects, the film captures the ambivalence of those two immigrant-nations towards their more recent and tenaciously unsanitizing citizens. The informal narrator of the Israel chapter crosses a playground bemoaning the ethnic segregation he sees, and as if to make his point, the path he takes starkly separates the Ethiopian Jewish immigrants’ failed expectations upon arrival, and Boganim’s relocating subjects often treat their condition with a bemused indulgence.

It is only in the last chapter, with a few scenes that seem staged, that the film falters, threatening to lose its delicate and intimate subjectivity. And it is a resilient cinEaste who won’t feel a tad fatigued towards the ending of the film. But it is easily compensated for by the richly rewarding experience this stirring and tender piece of cinema offers.

ODESSA/ODESSA

Director: Michale Boganim
2005, 96 min

Candis Society is screening Odessa/Odessa at Alliance Française in Tripureshwore this Sunday, 27 January at 6pm

CRITICAL CINEMA

A Angelo DiSilva

Drama in real life

A riveting new radio series promises to spread a message of tolerance and peace

KUNDA DIXIT

In early years after the collapse of the Nepali media has been trying through various formats, to be a part of the national reconciliation process.

Katia Mitho Sarangiko (Story of the Sweet Sarangi) uses radio, the medium that is the most prevalent and most-underutilised in Nepal. The message of peace and justice is woven into a series of 48 drama episodes, each 11 minutes long, and will be aired on the BBC Nepal Service and more than 70 FM stations throughout Nepal from the first week of February till June.

The drama series tells the story of Dilu Gandarba, a young minstrel from Nepalgunj near Pokhara (played by Prakash Gandarba) and Sukindere Gupta of Janakpur (played by real-life Janakpur resident, 17-year-old Ujjwal Mishra). The plot is in some of the episodes revolves around the adventures of a pahadi sarangi player and a madhesi dholak drummer. It is a fusion of the two musical instruments and delivers a subtle message of the co-existence of communities in Nepal.

The script is not preachy or in-your-face, and the conversation between Sukindere and Dilu and the way they share the joy and sadness of everyday life in contemporary Nepal carries an unmistakable message.

“We never use buzzwords like ‘peace’ or ‘justice’, we avoid Sanskrit words translated from English jingoisms, the characters speak colloquial Nepal and the message is subtly woven into the story,” emphasises Kedar Sharma, consultant to the drama series.

The recording technique is also unique. Katia wasn’t performed in a Kathmandu studio with actors caricaturing madhesi accents, but used genuine voices on location throughout Nepal. In one episode, deadening homes of highway buses punctuate the background as Dilu plays his sarangi, but the two sounds resonate in perfect harmony. In another, a real-life bus conductor playing a conductor argues with Dilu about his fare and the effect is of authenticity: no script writer could have got the exact nuance of a bus conductor’s colourful vocabulary or the madhesi lilt to his Nepali.

The drama also uses real-life characters like a Rukum farmer whose wife was killed in the conflict, playing himself. The part of a drug addict in Pokhara playing to extort money from his grandfather is played by a real ex-addict.

This is a documentary radio drama (a docu-drama, literally) recorded on location with the sounds, accents, cadences and rhythms of the real Nepal. It is difficult in the age of television to get people to sit riveted to radio, but during a preview last month, that is exactly what happened to us. The subtlety of the message, simplicity of language and depth of emotions left few dry eyes in the audience.

“This sort of production hasn’t been tried before in Nepal, but it has worked well in other parts of the world,” says co-producer Dipak Rauniyar.

ON AIR: Actors Smitiri Mishra and Prakash Gandarba record an episode of Katia Mitho Sarangiko in Janakpur last month.

Radio dramatist Fiona Ledger pioneered this format and has used it for peace-building in African countries. “Written language is all too often a formalised version of the spoken word,” Ledger told Nepali Times. “By producing dramas that were improved, I wanted to bypass a tendency among playwrights to explore the dictionary rather than explore colloquial use of the spoken word.”

Ledger says there is one major difference between Nepal and English-speaking countries in Africa: “Nepal has drawn on a literary inheritance that is at least 3,000 years old.”

It can safely be predicted that Katia Mitho Sarangiko will be a big hit throughout the country in the coming months, not just entertaining audiences but carrying a strong message of peace and coexistence.

Dilu’s part is played by a real-life Gandarba, Prakash, who fits right into the role. “I am just doing what my ancestors used to do, which is to go from village to village spreading the message through song, only my music: will go all over the country through radio,” Prakash said.

Katia Mitho Sarangiko
BBC World Service Trust
Produced by: Dipak Rauniyar, Siddhuram Pandey and Klangnuna Lamichhane
Editorial Consultant: Kedar Sharma
Concept: Fiona Ledger
48 episodes will be broadcast over 70 FM stations including BBC Nepal Service from the first week of February.

Buddhist drama Katha Mitho Sarangiko tells the story of Dilu Gandarba, a young minstrel from Nepalgunj near Pokhara (played by Prakash Gandarba) and Sukindere Gupta of Janakpur (played by real-life Janakpur resident, 17-year-old Ujjwal Mishra). The plot in some of the episodes revolves around the adventures of a pahadi sarangi player and a madhesi dholak drummer. It is a fusion of the two musical instruments and delivers a subtle message of the co-existence of communities in Nepal.

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Kenyans’ rich cultural tapestry, wonderful scenery, and astonishing wildlife had been calling us for years. Why fate dictated we’d arrive just before a storm election plan leaving the country into chaos is another matter altogether.

MOVING TARGET
Foreign Hand

Perhaps I’m drawn to such crises after so many years of bad politics in Nepal. Holidaying in a country sans political turmoil might be like going cold-turkey. Worse still, there’s reason to suspect civil strife follows the Hand around, as riots erupt with disturbing frequency wherever he goes. If word of this got out I could be banned from entire continents.

Arriving in Nairobi ten days before the event initially seemed lucky. With Christmas, elections on 27 December and the New Year in air the mood was festive and upbeat. Political rallies looked like celebrations and while touring the central highlands, a landscape so lovely as to ensure optimism, any chance of violence seemed very remote indeed.

Kenya’s promise of a more inclusive democracy, engaging people, sophisticated in their social dealings and proud of their country’s diversity and stability. Many went to great lengths in explaining that no matter which side won, violence was a thing of the past. Such charming if ultimately misguided idealism reminded me of Nepal in the early 1990s, when disaster are second nature by now.

Skills gained on the ground in Nepal served me well. The coastal areas are infused with strong Omani Arab and Indian cultural influences, adhere to Islam, and despite bringing in South Asia casteism, two names of similar betrayals endured by Nepalis. Highlanders who arrogantly believe in their god-given right to rule is an all too familiar theme around here, and once again an elite, short-sighted and contemptuous of their subjects, was willing to gamble it all to retain power.

This election was supposed to bolster Kenya’s role as a beacon of stability in a troubled region. Instead the country has suddenly plunged the country into chaos is another matter altogether. Our advice is a key part of the Moving Target Strategy. As markets shut down and tensions rose, our drinking buddies insisted we flee before all hell broke loose. They agreed our next destination, remote Lamu Island, was far enough removed from everywhere to be safe but fiercely opposed our plan to go by road. Late-night calls to their friend, the pilot, ensured we got seats on the tiny prop plane leaving the next day.

One of our mates drove us through deserted streets to the airport (Kenya Bandh?) and sure enough, Mombasa buzzed up within hours of our departure. Mellow Lamu was the right place to be. Nairobi’s column burning, highways shut down and riots engulfed the county. In Africa it’s called tribalism, in South Asia casteism, two names for the same grim reaper of ethnic violence that hangs over both regions. Innocent Kikuyus living outside the highlands were the first victims of the backlash against their president’s deceit.

When it became obvious the election was being flamed the dimmy reminded me poignantly of similar betrayals endured by Nepalis. Highlanders who arrogantly believe in their god-given right to rule is an all too familiar theme around here, and once again an elite, short-sighted and contemptuous of their subjects, was willing to gamble it all to retain power.

This election was supposed to bolster Kenya’s role as a beacon of stability in a troubled region. Instead the country has suddenly jumped the likes of Nepal teetering on the edge of calamity. God knows we all deserve better.
ABOUT TOWN

EXHIBITIONS

- Acrylic paintings by Asha Dongre at the Park Gallery, Lazimpat, until 30 January. 10AM-6PM. 4419353
- Tibetan Line art photographs by Daniel Collins at the Saturday Cafe, Boudhanath stupa, 6 February-31 March.

EVENTS

- Nepali Hindu rituals a presentation by Mona Pokhrel Adhikari, a C5GM event, 30 January. 5.30 PM at the Shaker Hotel
- Rangavad in Nepali literature Shastrartha with Govind Raj Bhattarai. 3-5PM, 26 January at Martin Chautari. 6910277
- Buddha Rediscovered a talk on the roots of Buddhism by historian Charles Allen, 29 January. 5.30 PM at Baltik, Babar Mahal Revisited.
- Media Discussion Series on the market of documentaries with Bhupendra Basnet and Suchitra Shrestha, 31 January. 3PM at Martin Chautari. 4236055
- Youth Discussion Series on water, energy and our strategy. 3PM, 1 February at Martin Chautari. 4238050
- The Kathmandu Chorale rehearsal for the Spring season, 4 February. 7PM, at The British School, Sanepa. All singers welcome.

MUSIC

- Paleti with Prem Dhoj Pradhan, 25 January, at the nepa laya 6th salon. Kalkasthan, 5.30 PM. 4412469
- Ciney Gurung every Wednesday and Rashmi Singh every Friday, live at the Absolute Bar, Hotel Narayani Complex, 5PM. 5521408
- Catch 22 live at the Zest Restaurant and Bar, Pulchok.

DINING

- Smokey Mountain High midday BBQ lunch at Dwarikas Himalayan Shangri-La Village Resort, Dhulikhel, 26 January. Rs 701 including a bottle of beer.
- Illy espresso coffee at the Galleria cafe. Thamel with contemporary Art exhibition at the Galleria lounge, every Friday espresso coffee cocktails, also at Park Village, Budhanilkantha.
- International four course buffet at the Sunrise Cafe with a range of Borsi signature dishes at The Chimney, Hotel Yak and Yeti. 4424999
- Wine and Cheese every Friday and Saturday at the Rox Bar, Hyatt Regency. 5-8PM. 4481234
- Jazz in Patan with coffee, drinks and dessert at the New Orleans Cafe, Jawalakhel. 11.30 AM-10PM. 5522708
- Saturday special barbeque, setnuwa, momos, dal-bhat at The Tea House Inn, Windy Hills, Nagarkot every Saturday. 9841230848.
- Dice-lucky brunch at Kohori, Soapstone Crowne Plaza, roll the dice to the number of the day and get 50% discount on an individual meal, Saturdays and Sundays. 12.30-3.30PM. 4273999
- Scrumptious wood fired pizza, cocktails and specialty coffees at Roadhouse, Bhatbateni. 4426587, Pullman 5521755 and Thamel 4260187.
- Cocktails and jazz with the JCS Quartet and a choice of coffees at Fusion Bar at Dwarikas, 4476648
- Starry night barbeque at Hotel Shangri-la with Ciney Gurung. Rs. 666.00 nett. per person, at the Shambala Garden, every Friday 6.30 PM onwards. 4412999
- Kebabs and curries at the Dhaba, Thapathali. 9841290619
- Calculatia rolls, biryani, kebabs Indian cuisine at Bawarchi, Bluebird Mall Food Court. 9741000735
- LaVaza coffee Italyís favourite coffee at La Dolce Vita, Thamel. 4708612
- Little Britian coffee shop fresh organic coffee, homemade cakes, WiFi internet, open all day, everyday. 4498207
- Pizza from the woodfired oven at Java, Thamel. 4422519

GETaways

- Fulbari Resort and Spa, Pokhara Rs 10,999 for Nepali double, $219 for expat double, two days and three nights package, with transportation from the airport, drinks, tennis and swimming, discounts on food and beverages.
- Weekend getaways at Le Meridien, Kathmandu. Resident Night Rs 4,999 and two nights package Rs 9,998. Also includes breakfast, lunch, dinner, spa facilities, swimming pool, steam sauna, Jacuzzi and gym facilities.

For inclusion in the listing send information to editors(at)nepalitimes.com

Kagbeni begins with Krishna coming back to his village after spending time in Malaysia. After visiting his friend Ramesh, they decide to travel together. On their journey they come across a hermit who hands Krishna an animalís paw that has power to fulfil wishes, but also creates horrific consequences. Unaware of its ominous powers, Ramesh makes a wish, and the journey of betrayal and revenge begins.

Call 4442220 for show timings at Jal Nepal
www.jalnepal.com

CITY
When Nabil Bank opened in 1984, it was the first foreign joint venture in Nepal’s banking sector and enjoyed first player advantage. But it didn’t last. Soon, there were other multinationals: Grindlays and Indosuez overtook Nabil.

Nabil had transformed the way banking was done, providing a breath of fresh air for those used to the shoddy and indifferent service at the public sector banks. But by the 1990s there were others who offered the same service. Nabil didn’t exactly go into decline, but it seemed to have lost its edge.

Then, three years ago, it brought in management talent from India. That effort was to induct course corrections and one part of the board decided to make some direction. That was when the decline, but it seemed to have lost its edge.

CRISPLY PUT: Nabil’s CEO Anil Shah has given his bank a role that goes beyond banking to spur economic growth in the hinterland.

Shah has gone about systematically re-inventing the Nabil brand, overhauling everything from the mission statement to giving the bank a new strategic direction in rural banking.

“We didn’t want to be an also-ran,” Shah said in an interview this week after Nabil was selected as the Nepali Times Company of the Month for January. “We brainstormed about what we wanted to be and everyone agreed we had to be Nepal’s bank of first choice.”

Indeed, ‘Nepal’s Bank of First Choice’ has now become Nabil’s slogan and was the product of an exercise to draft a new mission statement that involved the entire staff.

“Everyone participated in the process, so it is a vision that we all own. Our mission statement is not a destination, it is a journey,” says Shah listing the bank’s stakeholders: customers, shareholders, regulators, the community and staff.

Besides being profitable and efficient, Nabil wants to be a model multinational joint venture and a template for its corporate social responsibility (CSR) efforts.

“Some of Shah’s acronyms seem to come straight out of the formula of management gurus. ‘C’ is for ‘corporate’; ‘R’ is for ‘result oriented’, ‘S’ for ‘synergy’ and ‘P’ for professional.’

A decade ago, Pushpa Kamal Dahal who was asked by journalists after joining the peace process if he’d ever go back to the jungle. “We were never in the jungle, we were in the real Nepal,” Dahal had said.

Shah says it is not enough in a country like Nepal for banks to be profitable and pay taxes. “There is a higher calling, we have to ask ourselves, are we helping make a difference. And the way we do that is by taking financial services to rural areas and make that a catalyst for economic growth and employment generation,” says Shah. “In 1984, Nabil brought international banking to Kathmandu. In 2007 we took banking to rural Nepal.”

Nabil’s management has tried to find the middle ground between efficiency of a multinational joint venture and a Nepali bank. This hybrid formula, they hope, will position the bank to adjust to the post-2010 era from when foreign banks will be allowed in without restrictions according to a WTO membership timetable. Nabil has a strategic decision to target rural customers. Among the reasons is a crowded urban market, the injection of remittance money into the countryside, and the fact that the default rate is virtually zero in the districts.

Two months ago, the bank launched the first phase of its rural banking drive by opening a dozen new semi-urban branches in the districts. By next year, Nabil will have 30 branches in even more remote areas. “Of Nepal’s 27 million people 20 million live in rural areas, you can’t be a national bank by ignoring that,” says Shah, who admits he got the inspiration from Maoist leader Pushpa Kamal Dahal who was asked by journalists after joining the peace process if he’d ever go back to the jungle. “We were never in the jungle, we were in the real Nepal,” Dahal had said.

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Varun launches Dhapasi luxury apartments

Park View Horizon was recently launched by Varun Developers, a subsidiary of RJ Corp. This is a group whose portfolio includes Pepsi Bottling, retail, fast food, health care and real estate development. Situated at Dhapasi Heights, Park View offers 185 super-luxurious condominiums.

Nepali Times spoke to Ravi Jaipuria of RJ Corp (above) in Kathmandu this week.

Nepali Times: In Nepal, you are known primarily as Pepsi bottlers. Isn’t selling real estate a different line of business altogether?

Ravi Jaipuria: Yes, we’ve been doing business in Nepal for the last 10 years as a bottler for Pepsi. Our presence here has made us familiar in and with this country. We have experienced the ups and the downs in the market here. Our portfolio in India, Sri Lanka and other countries includes businesses in real estate in addition to those of fast food, health care and education. Combining our Nepal-based business and real estate management experiences, we decided to get into building apartments in Kathmandu. We are confident that the market for apartments is growing here.

In recent years, we’ve seen a rise in the number of housing companies in Nepal. How are you different?

We offer four things that our competitors cannot match: quality, size, location and design. We offer central heating and air-conditioning in all our buildings. Our buildings are high-rises that go up to 15 storeys. At Park View Horizon, we offer 200 apartments. Our location is at Dhapasi Heights, which is not far from the city, yet outside of it. You can see the Himalayas from the top floors. It was designed by the architects who designed the India Habitat Centre in New Delhi.

Some people may object to Kathmandu becoming a place for high-rise residential buildings. How do you respond to their concerns?

We understand their concerns. We are proud to say that we are the first developers permitted by the government’s Ministry of Environment. Before starting work, we did an environmental impact assessment for about six months. What we have designed today is an eco-friendly community resident centre.

One criticism of developers is that they buy chunks of land to build secluded housing colonies for rich people. In the process, they neglect local communities.

In our case, we have not neglected the local Dhapasi communities. We have built a community centre for nearby residents. We have put in road networks to the surrounding villages. We have hired local workers in our project, and our contractor is the Nepal-based Chitawan Koie. At every step of our project, we have thought and planned like local residents. We offer world-class amenities, 70 percent open landscape and the best global themes in home décor that will target high-end premium clientele. We expect the project to be a success and in the near future more such ventures will come up.
CHILD RELIEF: (l-r) Kan Tun (WHO), Yasho Vardhan Pradhan (Child Health Division), Gillian Mellop and Prabhat Bangdel (UNICEF), Anne Penniston (USAID) and Ian Pett (UNICEF ROSA) released a report on the state of Nepal’s children at Hotel Himalaya on Thursday.

ENDLESS DEMANDS: Maoist Trade Union members at Surya Nepal strike on Wednesday for a 100 percent bonus and a provident fund, among 15 new demands.

STRONG BELIEF: The faithful carry the statue of Rato Machhendranath (God of Rain) from Bungamati to Patan during a festival on Saturday.

STAGE FRIGHT: Actors perform a play based on Sanjiv Upreti’s novel Ghanachakkarī at the Gurukul Sama Theatre on Tuesday.
One thing this week’s oil price riots did was distract the public’s attention from the fact that we have finally been able to see the first on-screen kiss in a Nepali movie.

Not that Nepalis don’t osculate in real life. In fact, after ass-licking, paying lip-service is our favourite national pastime. But in reel life the camera in traditional Nepali musicals usually pans across to ducks in a pond when the time comes for the hero to deliver mouth-to-mouth resuscitation on the heroine. There was the usual wolf whistling at Gopi Krishna, and some went twice to watch the ‘hot scene’ in Kagbeni. But, for the most part, Nepalis took it in their stride and didn’t get as worked up about The Kiss as they did with the hike in fuel prices.

What this proves is that a kiss is still a kiss. And the fundamental thing that is still unattainable to the Ass is how come the Maoists, who are in government and hold five ministerial berths, agree to a hefty fuel price hike and then unleash their students to bring the country to a halt for two days to force a rolback. Marie Antoinette may have said ‘let them eat cake’ but our comrades want to have their cakes and eat them too.

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Which must be why Comrade Lotus Eater has continued his meetings with intransigent royalists and assured them that he is willing to let bygones be bygones. President Awesome met ex-minister Awful last week, and told reporters: ‘He ain’t such a bad guy after all!’ Ass prediction (you saw it here first) is that Sri Paunch President is going to meet Sri Paunch Maharajadhiraj one of these days and the two are going to get along like a house on fire and swap roles.

A car in the presidential motorcade ran over a boy near Pokhara while the comrades were on their way to the First Son’s wedding party. The whole thing was hushed up and the boy’s family received six lakhs. Remind you of something?

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So Unmean has recruited the Brits to push through a widened mandate in New York. They should’ve talked to the Chinese first, because Beijing is livid that the document still treats the government and the Maoists as two different entities and puts ex-guerrillas at the same level as the national army. Besides, how is UNMIN going to take on all the added work with all the top level defectors and resignations it has suffered recently?

All this Hindi-Chini-bhai-bhai may be a bit exaggerated, though. A week after a group of madhesi journos attended a junket in India, the Chinese took three tarai hacks to China. A yam between two stones.

And shouldn’t someone be asking why we need constitutional experts from Kenya at this juncture in their history? Don’t we have our own Damai Nathi? Do we really need Sudanese, Yemeni and Ecuadorian monitors when our own guys are doing such a great job in Afghanistan? Why do we want lectures on inclusiveness from a country where the election poster of a mainstream party depicts migrants as black sheep?

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